

The Psychology of Uncertainty: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of Identity Reconstruction During Major Life Transitions

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R e v i e w e r s

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1. Round 1

1.1. Reviewer 1

Reviewer:

In the Methods section, the sentence “Using purposive sampling, 18 participants were recruited on the basis of their direct experience of a significant life transition and their capacity and willingness to describe that experience in detail” requires further methodological justification. A sample of 18 is relatively large for a conventional idiographic IPA study, particularly when participants represent multiple types of transitions. The authors should explain why 18 cases were necessary, how the sample size was determined, and how sufficient idiographic depth was maintained before cross-case analysis. The current reference to “sufficient experiential depth, richness, and convergence” resembles saturation terminology more commonly associated with thematic analysis or grounded theory. Because IPA does not rely primarily on saturation as a sample-size criterion, the authors should revise this language and justify sample adequacy in accordance with IPA principles.

In the Methods paragraph describing eligibility, the manuscript states that transitions must have occurred “within approximately six months to three years prior to participation.” This wide interval requires justification because the phenomenological experience of uncertainty may differ substantially between an individual seven months into a transition and another nearly three years removed from it. The authors should explain why this time window was selected and how temporal

distance was considered analytically. Since the Findings later suggest that participants with greater temporal distance sometimes exhibited more integrated reconstruction, the timing of interviews is not merely a descriptive characteristic but a potentially important interpretative dimension. The analysis should therefore examine whether elapsed time systematically influenced thematic patterns rather than discussing this only briefly after themes were generated.

Table 3 contains quotations such as “It felt like I had left one place but had not arrived anywhere else” and “I became less afraid that I might change again.” These quotations are effective illustrations, but the manuscript should clarify whether they are exact translated verbatim quotations or edited for readability. If they were condensed, grammatically corrected, or reconstructed from longer responses, this must be disclosed. Furthermore, five quotations are insufficient for a study of 18 participants and fifteen subordinate themes. The authors should incorporate substantially more first-person material throughout the Findings section, particularly passages demonstrating ambiguity, contradictions, emotional shifts, and cases that did not conform to the dominant reconstruction trajectory.

In the integrative Findings section, the manuscript states that reconstruction involved “a movement from certainty-based identity toward reflexive identity.” This is an important interpretative claim, but “certainty-based identity” and “reflexive identity” are introduced without prior definition and may represent concepts constructed by the authors rather than directly derived theme labels. The authors should either define these concepts explicitly as higher-order interpretations emerging from the analysis or avoid introducing additional theoretical terminology at the end of the Findings. If retained, the manuscript should demonstrate how these concepts were derived from specific participant accounts and distinguish them from established concepts such as self-concept clarity, identity flexibility, narrative identity, and uncertainty tolerance.

Authors revised and uploaded the document.

1.2. Reviewer 2

Reviewer:

In the Data Collection Tools section, the manuscript reports that interviews were conducted “either in person in Tehran or, when necessary, through a secure online audio or video communication platform.” The authors should provide the exact number of interviews conducted in each modality and discuss whether interview mode may have influenced depth of disclosure, rapport, observation of nonverbal behavior, or field-note quality. This issue is particularly relevant in phenomenological research, where the richness and contextual character of participants’ narratives are central to analysis. The manuscript should also specify whether interviews were conducted by one researcher or multiple researchers, describe the interviewer’s training in qualitative interviewing and IPA, and indicate whether there was any prior relationship between interviewers and participants.

The paragraph describing the interview guide states that “the interview questions were deliberately open-ended and flexible,” but no actual interview questions are provided. For transparency and reproducibility, the authors should include several core questions and representative probes, either in the Methods section or as supplementary material. Particularly important would be questions addressing the experience of uncertainty, perceived changes in identity, discontinuity between past and present selves, interpersonal responses, meaning-making, and imagined future selves. The manuscript should also explain whether the interview guide was piloted, with whom, and what modifications were made after pilot testing. Simply stating that wording and sequencing were adjusted does not provide sufficient methodological detail.

In the Methods section, the authors state that “all interviews were digitally audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim in Persian.” Because the manuscript is written in English and Table 3 presents participant quotations in English, the translation procedure requires explicit description. The authors should explain who translated quotations, whether translation occurred before or after analysis, whether the IPA coding was conducted entirely in Persian, and what procedures were used to preserve culturally embedded meanings during translation. If bilingual checking, back-translation, consensus translation, or review by an independent bilingual researcher was performed, this should be reported. For a phenomenological study, where meaning may depend on metaphor, idiom, emotional nuance, and culturally specific expressions, translation is an analytic issue rather than merely a technical one.

In the Data Analysis section, the statement that analysis involved “descriptive content,” “linguistic features,” and “conceptual reflections” is appropriately aligned with IPA, but the description should more explicitly follow a recognized IPA analytic sequence. The authors should clarify how experiential statements were transformed into subordinate themes, how personal experiential themes were developed for each case, and how group experiential themes were constructed across cases. It is also important to indicate whether themes were generated independently by multiple researchers or primarily by one analyst. The current phrase that disagreements were “resolved through discussion” implies multiple analysts, but the manuscript never clearly identifies their respective analytic roles. Greater procedural transparency is needed to establish dependability.

The Methods section states that the researchers attempted “to bracket, as far as practically possible, the thematic structure developed from previous cases.” This wording requires refinement because IPA does not assume complete phenomenological bracketing in the Husserlian sense; rather, it recognizes interpretation as inseparable from the double hermeneutic. The manuscript should articulate reflexivity more carefully by describing how researchers identified and monitored preconceptions rather than implying that previous interpretations could simply be suspended. A concise positionality statement would be valuable, identifying the researchers’ disciplinary backgrounds, professional experience with counseling or life transitions, and assumptions that could have shaped interpretation. Reflexive memos should then be described as a mechanism for critically engaging with these pre-understandings.

The Findings section reports five superordinate themes and fifteen subordinate themes, beginning with “the collapse of assumed continuity” and ending with “the emergence of a reconstructed but unfinished identity.” The thematic structure is coherent and conceptually appealing, but several theme labels appear highly interpretative and theoretically polished relative to the limited participant quotations presented. The authors should strengthen evidential grounding by including more verbatim extracts within each thematic section and showing how different participants expressed both convergence and divergence. Ideally, each subordinate theme should be supported by multiple quotations from different participants rather than being explained mainly through researcher-generated narrative. This would enable readers to assess the relationship between participants’ lived accounts and the interpretative claims made by the authors.

Table 2 reports theme frequencies such as “17 participants (94.4%)” for the collapse of assumed continuity and “13 participants (72.2%)” for the emergence of a reconstructed but unfinished identity. The authors should reconsider whether this quasi-quantification is consistent with the epistemological orientation of IPA. Counting themes can unintentionally imply prevalence, representativeness, or hierarchy based on frequency, whereas IPA is principally concerned with experiential significance and idiographic interpretation. If the frequency table is retained, the authors should provide a stronger rationale and explicitly state the criteria used to determine that a participant “demonstrated” a theme. An alternative would be to replace percentages with a case-presence matrix or qualitative descriptors such as pervasive, recurrent, and less common, while preserving the individual-case structure more faithfully.

Authors revised and uploaded the document.

2. Revised

Editor’s decision after revisions: Accepted.

Editor in Chief’s decision: Accepted.